Castlemaine Naturalist

December '96
Vol 20.11 #229

The Niceties of Nest Building

In reply to Nigel Harland's "Nest Recycling" (Castlemaine Naturalist, Nov. '96), I, like Nigel, have the joy of working at home. As his neighbour I see many birds in common with him, and have the good fortune to have his identification expertise so close. Yellow-tufted Honeyeaters, Willy Wagtails, Blue Wrens and White-browed Scrub Wrens are the predominent birds using the space closest to our house.

Last year we had the joy of having Wagtails nesting on a power cord draped on the beams in our sheep shed, right above where we were working daily. We were treated to the pair's intricate performances of selecting and "discussion" as to the suitability of each beakful of materials. This involved much loud song, somehow performed with the beak full of the stuff to be considered. There was always repetitive "dance" with wings and tails shuffling. Incorporating materials into the structure involved much mutual approval, manouvering and ritual between the partners. Shaping the cup seemed to use excessive amounts of a whole body vibration. Eventually, eggs were laid, brooded and a fine family hatched. Our stint of daily wool shed work ceased just as the resulting family were building flying skills. Throughout, the Wagtails seemed quite oblivious to our presence and continued their business, apparantly unperturbed through the noise and general bedlam of the shearing of sheep, with people working and machinery going a metre or so below.

This year the Sheep Shed Willies chose a less convenient spot from the human observers' point of view, but, like Nigel, we had Willies set up house just outside our door. We don't have the accommodation standards of the Harlands (no under-floor heating!), so this pair built on a vine which is invading the space under our walkway. The roof of the walkway is fibreglass sheeting and the nest top is about 10cm from the roofing material. Now, although I guess we COULD have used the other door, only the nest was right beside our woodbox, and the walkway gives access to our "other room", the clothesline, etc. With our experience of the Sheep Shed Willies we simply didn't worry about disturbing the nesting procedures. But what a difference! For a long time I really thought there was a single parent in the midst of a

flamboyant nervous breakdown. I never saw the pair interacting. The slightest noise or activity from inside the back door, let alone outside, would have the Willie alarm in full blast, and the bird would dash away in apparant terror. There never seemed time for nestbuilding rituals of any complexity. I'm not sure how the eggs were laid - I suspect that the hen screamed in at some stage when each egg was about to pop and let it drop in the nest. There was some sitting - very occasionally, by carefully and silently squinting sideways out of the bathroom window, I could just make out a bird on the nest. Any closer and it was off. I believe that the fibreglass sheeting was probably the real brooder - a sort of surrogate solar powered parent to the eggs? Never-the-less, the eggs hatched, the babes were fed (they were **very quiet** for nestlings), and all three are currently happily flying round the house, discovering the difficulties of getting in and out of the greenhouses, and the delicacies to be snapped up on our front windw ledges. One of the adults has been exploring the woodbox for the past few days, so maybe we'll see another brood.

My real reason for writing was not to upstage Nigel's nest recycling but to report on some seasonal contruction problems. Having built ourselves a mudbrick house, we have been particularly interested in other users of this material. Various wasps and the Welcome Swallows find our mudbrick walls ideal foundations for their additions. This season, swallows decided to nest right on the back door surround and on the equivalent position on the closest window surround. Their mud was very sloppy, and, despite additions of straw, most mud slid off the wall and hit the doorstep. Unknown to me, my husband was trying to dissuade the builders by knocking down the initial structure beside the door in the hope that the swallow would become fed up and choose a fresh site out of our walking lanes. What a mess! I can't tell one swallow from another, but when a bird was found dead on the ground. work on both partially built nests ceased. Maybe that single bird was working on both simultaneously in the hope that something would stay up long enough to dry?

When we prepared the sheep shed for shearing, two swallows' nests were under construction on the beams. Large piles of debris were accumulating below each, and one had a vast amount of cashmere fibres festooning from the partially built nest and debris. As it was right over the middle of a sheep pen we had to rig a double bed sheet under it to catch any further fibres from falling down to contaminate the wool.. The other constuction was against a wall and included much straw (stout pieces up to pencil length) as well as hunks of shed goat coat. We protected the immediate vicinity and hoped that the swallows didn't drop their bundles as they flew to the nest site. As we worked, we observed the swallows collecting mud from the puddles just outside and speeding it back to the nests. It certainly **was** sloppy. Some mud stayed put, but much dribbled off. With such a wet winter, it must have been

impossible to collect much of a reasonable consistency for building and the damp conditions hindered the drying process. Usually, swallow nests here contain little fibrous matter. When we make mud bricks from our local soil we do add about 7 litres of finely shredded straw (approx 1-2 cm lengths) to a concrete mixer load of soil to prevent cracking in the final brick, but bricks can be successfully made without it.

The sequel to Nigel's November story is that the Willie eggs in the nest on his spotlight globe didn't hatch. A smashed shell on the flooring below is the only clue to the mystery. As I spoke with Nigel recently at his front door, an agitated Willie appeared to want to return to this nest, so we quickly evacuated the area. I guess the Harlands are back to using only their back door.

Marg. Hunter

P.S. We were delighted to find that on a recent check there were signs of fresh leaves in the nesting box up the tree in our chook yard, and the two Sugar Gliders curled up fast asleep in a nearby box. It made clambering round in the thick Gahnia radula underneath all worthwhile.

M.H.

November Birds, 61 Hunter St.

Since the red Willow Bottlebrush (Calistemon salignum) has begun to bloom there has been great activity in the area. Red Wattlebirds with two young are usually first on the scene each day, followed by New Holland Honeyeaters and Yellow-faced Honeyeaters. Eastern Spinebills - including Juveniles - are very expert at hovering "hummingbird style" beneath the drooping flowers as they feed. Occasionally there are Silvereyes, of which there are fewer than usual at this time of year.

The crimson Rosellas had become very quite and elusive recently, but a close inspection of the nest box revealed six or seven very strong, raucous nestlings.

A pair of Blackbirds who have nested higher up in the tree seem alarmed by the noisy little parrots, and can be seen now and them curiously investigating the parrot box.

Meanwhile, the pardalote box has also been occupied, and several Striated Pardalotes are feeding the noisy nestlings there. Some Yellow-rumped Thornbills visit the bird bat hand sit in the near-by peach tree to groom themselves in the early morning sum or graze on the grass underneath.

The Rufous Whistler and Mistletoebirds are around, but the only cuckoo heard this year has been the Pallid cuckoo in early spring.

Shirley Parnaby

Wishing you all a very Happy Christmas

A REGISTER OF SIGNIFICANT PLANTS FOR THE MT ALEXANDER SHIRE

The Shire does not have a register of significant plants. The Shire is at present developing a planning scheme, and information about what the significant plants are, and where they are, will be of great value.

The Club proposes to start preparation of a register. The register would include individual plants, groups of plants, and significant plant associations. Plants may be indigenous or introduced. The size could range from mighty trees to tiny herbs or orchids. The plants may be on privately owned property or public land.

Some of the plants in the Shire are on the Victorian Register. We will also include these on our local register. The survey of roadsides carried over the past few years has provided an assessment of each road, as having high, medium or low conservation status. During the roadside assessment, notes were taken about significant plants, for example, the Snow Gums at Elphinstone, the Banksias at Sutton Grange and Metcalfe. These will also be included on the register.

Collectively, Club members have a wealth of information. We need to collate this. You are asked to fill out the sheet enclosed with this newsletter.

Plants to include in the register. Any plant, the loss of which would make a noticeable diminution in the heritage of the shire, should be included. Don't think that someone else will include this plant. The register could include:

-the best example of each species in the Shire - the best English Oak, the best Grey Box, and so on.
-plants of outstanding height
-plants of considerable trunk circumference, or spread
-plants which are rare or of a localised distribution
-plants which exhibit an unusual growth pattern
-plants of historical significance.
-plants which are good habitat plants.

If the plant is on private property, then it would be advisable to seek permission from the owner to include the plant.

Returns need not be on the enclosed sheet. Write on any suitable piece of paper. The information will be collated, and printed.

The next steps. The task is too big for just the Club members. We will circulate the preliminary list to local groups - the garden Clubs and historical societies, and interested individuals. We will also work closely with the Shire's Heritage Committee. A publicity campaign, seeking people to nominate plants on their own property could also be appropriate.

If you support this project, make sure you get your return in.

E Perkins

Observations

* First Caper White butterfly at Sandon 13/10. S.S.
* Dozens of Tiger Orchids on the property at Sandon. S.S.
* Pure white Bearded Orchids where found at Smiths Reef again, and Flying Duck orchids at Glenluce. F.B.
* Desdemonium varians (Variable Tic-trefoil) found at Muckleford Gorge. This rare trailing plant is a first for the plant list. N. de M.
* A large patch (2-3 acres) of rice flowers were found in an area that has been a swamp during this Winter. M.D.
* An Austraian Raven seen chasing a Brown Falcon (the Raven may have had a nest nearby). It created quite a din. M.D.
* Bee Easters have returned to Mount Alexander. Wattlebirds had chased all the small birds away from the area, and then the Noisy Friar birds moved in and chased the Wattlebirds away. Golden Moth orchids have been seen on the property. and Sugar Gliders are using the nesting boxes near the fowl yard. M.H.
* A Bearded Dragon in the yard at Little Bendigo. C.M.
* The Button-quail seen again scampering for cover in the front garden in Thomas St. M.W.
* An Olive-backed Oriole seen clearly in the garden in Fryers Rd, Chewton. L.R.
* Musk Lorikeets seen at Harcourt. B.E.
* Only two White Browed Babblers seem to be left at Tullaroop. Also seen were a pair of Hardheads with five ducklings. M.O.
* B.E. watched a Magpie doing all sorts of acrobatics at Harcourt. Eventually she reallised it was chasing a butterfly.
* Many pairs of Shinglebacks were seen in the Kara Kara box/ironbark forest near St Arnaud. One or two pairs of Powerful Owls are reported to be nesting in there. C.M.
* Numerous Diamond Firetails seen on the lawns and shrubs of the picnic area at Tullaroop. R.M., M.O.
* A Grey Butcherbird was seen at Junortoun. This is the closest report so far for Castlemaine. E.P.
* Several people reported on the number of Orioles calling this year - Tullaroop, N. Castlemaine, Muckleford, etc,etc.
* G.B. was "severely menaced" by a Dusky Moorhen in the gardens. It came flying up at his face feet-first. The behaviour suggested a nest near-by.
* M.W. and family and friends have had wonderful views of a Rufous Whistler in Thomas St. One of the circle of calling-perches is right outside the dining room window.

A Mynah Battle!

A pair of Common Mynahs turned up near 118 Blakeley Rd. about the beginning of November, and, after a week of hearing them calling somewhere I found they were contemplating taking over the older Galahs'

nest in the corner of the house yard. Needless to say I was pretty upset, and not sure what to do. I was out playing with the dog when they started to call and caught my attention. I yelled at them and tried to throw a stone at them, and then a stick. Throwing is something I can't really do these days, so in frustration I banged the tin sides of the dog's shed with a stick, and they took fright and flew, resident Wattlebirds in pursuit, so each time I spotted them - usually because of their triumphant smarty-pants call (I'm just a little biased against Mynahs!) I banged something. By then, though, they were just transferring to the young Galahs' nest area. I stormed over and banged the top of the incinerator which just has a piece of tin for a cover. Pandemonium! They tore off to the south-west at a great rate of knots, with, as usually happened when I made a racket, the Wattlebirds in pursuit. (At the moment I almost approve of Wattlebirds). A few days of this treatment and they decided, apparantly, that they don't like the area after all, and this morning, after 5 Mynahless days, the two Galahs were back investigating the nest and greeting me. I just hope it lasts, but the loud noise, and the Wattlebirds pursuit, certainly made the Mynahs a bundle of nerves, and didn't seem to worry our locals a bit, and it seems to have been sucessful.

Rita Mills

29/11 Two pairs having a battle royal 110m away! They eventually flew off. I also noticed that the Galahs have started digging a new hollow a bit further up the trunk of the same tree. R.M.

From the"Age", 24/8/96, under the heading - "Native species outwitted by the pushy

Cane Toad with Wings"

by Greg Roberts

The Common or Indian Mynah - that garrulous, smartly coloured bird so numerous in Melbourne suburbs - is an environmental menace.

This "cane toad with wings" has been shown to brutally evict native birds from their nests and may be causing serious local declines in populations of parrots, Sugar Gliders and other wildlife.

Research conducted for the ACT Parks and Conservation Service examined whether Mynahs were displacing parrots by monopolising tree hollows used for nesting in woodlands in the Canberra area.

Over a 12 month period, Mynahs occupied 28 hollows while three native parrot species - Red-rumped Parrots, Crimson Rosellas and Eastern Rosellas - nested in a total of 14 hollows.

Another introduced bird, the Starling, had occupied a further 26 hollows, while seven more were home to introduced honey bees.

Non-native animals were occupying 81 per cent - and Mynahs 37 per cent - of the total 75 hollows.

Mynahs also snapped up 39 of the 66 artificial nest-boxes in the

study area.

Researchers observed altercations between Mynahs and parrots over nest sites. It found Mynahs triumphed in 28 of the 32 disputes with Eastern Rosellas, and 18 out of 28 squabbles with Crimson Rosellas.

According to research coordinator, Dr Chris Tideman of the Australian National University, the Mynah's impact is much greater than even these figures indicate because a pair will monopolise several hollows around the one it choses to nest in.

This is because in their native southern Asia, Mynahs build multiple nests to distract their main predator, the tree-climbing marten, a species that does not occur in Australia.

Dr Tideman said Mynahs seek out and destroy the eggs and young of native birds in hollows and have little difficulty monopolising the best nesting sites.

"They are extraordinarily aggresive and by sheer persistance, bloody-mindedness and force of numbers, they usually win the day."

Mynahs also have the advantage of starting their breeding season earlier than native birds, and may lay several clutches a year.

Bats, Owlet-nightjars and Dollar-birds are among other wildlife likely to be affected adversely by Mynahs, which have been known to force a rival as formidable as the Kookaburra from its nest.

The birds were first realeased in Melbourne in 1862, when it was fashionable to introduce exotic wildlife into Australia. Like the Cane Toad, they were later introduced to north Queensland in a fruitless bid to control cane beetles.

They were introduced to Canberra in 1970 by a former Sydneysider who pined for their distinctive calls.

PROGRESS ON THE SHIRE OF MOUNT ALEXANDER LCS

It is expected that the Draft Environmental Action Plan for the Shire will be released for community comment from **Tuesday 4 December 1996** to **Friday 19 December**. Community comment will then be considered by the Conservation Advisory Committee and, where relevant, will be written into the Action Plan.

Margaret Hunter was complimented for her work towards the Action Plan by Commissioner Bryant.

It is hoped that the Shire's Environmental Action Plan will be officially launched at a function to be held in Victory Park at 12 noon on Saturday March 8 1997, at the same function that it is planned to officially launch the Shire's Roadside Management Plan.

Quick Quiz - using the first letter of the following bird names re-arrange them to name something something all field nats should be familiar with (2 words)
wagtail; robin; fantail; dove; albatross.
egret; nightjar; grebe; owl; rosella; eagle; dotterel; oriole; heron;

Answer back page.

C.F.N.C. PROGRAMME

N.B. Excursions leave promptly at times stated.
General Meetings are held at Continuing Education, Templeton Street.

Fri Dec 13. **Members and Visitors Night.** 8pm Cont. Ed. Bring along 10 or 12 slides, or a short talk, – even a short video of an outing if you have one! and don't forget a plate of supper.

Sat Dec. 14. **Discovery Walk** from Shire boundary to Baringhup along Carisbrook/Baringhup road, (approx. 5–6km). Leave 27 Doveton St. at 10 am. Take lunch, drinks, etc., and wear a shady hat, boots, thick pants, gaiters or such. Leader E. Perkins.

Thurs Dec 19 **Bird Outing – note that the meeting place is the Market Carpark.** Meet at 9.30.

Thurs Jan 16 **Bird Outing to Tullaroop.** Meet at 4pm, in the Market car park. Bring Picnic Tea.

Fri Feb. 14 **Swamp Vegetation** Speaker is Ern Perkins. **This is the Annual Meeting.** A Nomination form for your use is included in this newsletter. Nominations need to be with the Secretary on the Friday before the Annual Meeting. Please post to the Club P.O.Box number at the foot of the page.

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Committee: C. Morris (Pres.), G. Broadway (V.P.), M. Willis (Corrosp. Sec.), B. Envall (Treas.), K. Turner, R.Mills (P.O. & N/L Ed.), E. Perkins, M. Oliver (Minute Sec.), B. Maund, J. Hewetson, M. Dredge.

Meetings:-

General – Second Friday every month (except Jan) at **Continuing Education, Templeton St.** at 8 pm.

Business – Held on the 4th Thursday every month (except Dec.) at 38 Campbell Street at 7.30pm. **All Members are invited to attend.**

Subscriptions - 1996

Ordinary Membership: single $14 Family $20
Pensioner/Student: Single $10 Family $16.
Supporting $25
Newsletter posted: Membership + $6

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Answer to Quick Quiz - Dwarf Greenhood. Thanks to Ken and Maureen Dredge.

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The Annual Meeting is on February 14 1997, and we are looking for new Committee members. The Committee meeting is always a pleasant evening, and new ideas for meetings and excursions are always needed. If you would be willing to join the Committee, or know of someone else who would be, please fill in the nomination form, which is in the Newsletter this month.

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Castlemaine Field Naturalists' Club Inc.
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